

# Locating Identity in the Diasporic Space of Moniza Alvi's Poetry

Ms. Pooja Swamy

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Hislop College, Nagpur, India  
Email id: poojalswamy@yahoo.co.in

**Abstract**— *The socio-cultural experiences associated with migration and different forms of displacement are captured by the concept of “diaspora” and the spatial evocation of ‘home’. The female writer contributes a gendered perspective to the diasporic discourse. Diasporic works, by their very nature often locate themselves in a liminal space between cultures while the female immigrant writer tries to create a foothold for herself in an even more minimal space, being a minority within a minority. Nostalgia is often a profound sub text in their attitudes towards spatial movements. Women, as the present paper sets out to explore have the ability to relate to two homes simultaneously. Moniza Alvi is a diasporic poet located in the United Kingdom but is a Pakistani. This ability to straddle two worlds from different countries is unique to women. The genres of novels and short story have been often dealt with pertaining to South Asian Diasporic literature. Hence this attempt to locate poetry in the corpus of immigrant women writing.*

**Keywords**— *Bhabha, Diaspora Poetry, Liminality, Moniza Alvi, Pakistan, Third Space.*

Diaspora poetry is a genre in itself. Poetry written by women cannot have the vision only of feminist poetry. Poetry is intensely personal yet carries a world within it. The South Asian women diasporic poets, as the contemporary novelists, are identifying their divided/multiple self in an alien land. The search of a home, to belong resonates through their creative outpourings. Women's poetry rewrites the canon of diasporic poetry through the varied focus on themes from home to identity, nationality to marginalization, literary free will to patriarchy to desire to sexual orientations. Mapping out new territories with their poems, the women poets essay a confessional style tracing the histories of their life and times. 'Diasporic poetics raise more questions than they answer and are just as much about displacement as about place, just as much about a 'poetics of uncertainty' as about certainties of style/nation/identity' (Web).

Daruwalla while attending one of the diasporic poetry events asserts, 'Hearing the unheard is important—and much of the diaspora poetry is unheard' with one of the poets Usha Akella declaring: "We are poets because

we dare to say the unsaid and we hear the unheard...we unlock experience with words" (Web).

Moniza Alvi from Pakistan is the focus for diasporic poetry in my paper centered on the positionality of location i.e. South Asia. The present paper deals with a young nation which has had a bloody birth. Pakistan is reeling under the violence it generates throughout the region of South Asia. It can be aptly called a country of refugees and exiles. Torn from divided independent India, Pakistan is embroiled in brutality and the status of women in such a hostile society is no wonder the most marginalized. In my search of the spatial trajectory of the South Asian diasporic authors from Pakistan I came across many women writers who have created a name for themselves in the western world. The diasporic viewpoint gets a whole new meaning when one of the established voices of American Pakistani diaspora Talat Abbasi asserts, '...I grew up in a way that I wouldn't have had I not left for foreign shores' (Web)

Amidst a number of voices present in the diaspora belonging to Pakistan, Alvi has been chosen for the obvious reasons of having a feminine diasporic consciousness with an identity of British diasporic poet. There are many significant women diasporic poets like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Sujata Bhatt, Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi to name a few. Bhatt and Alexander offer interesting spaces in diasporic poetry to interrogate questions which consequently come up. Bhatt's search for her tongue evokes nostalgia. Home remains central in her consciousness. She is concerned with the themes of women's voices in history and a sense of dislocation from her 'homeland'. Language is vital to her work while she talks about this dislocation. Her native language of Gujarati and Hindi is taken over by English. She feels more connected to her country India as she is away from it. This exile from the homeland forces her to have deliberations on it in her poetry. For Sujata Bhatt, home and nation are not just places but a fusion of memories of individuals, relationships, legends, anecdotes, family, rituals and history of one's own country.

Similarly Meena Alexander is another prominent name on the canvass of diasporic poetry. Her voice expresses her own lived diasporic experiences in her

poetry- uprooting and exile, migrant memories and trauma, separation and loneliness - all the way from India to Sudan and USA. Christened as Mary Elizabeth, she changed her name to Meena to get rid of the colonial burden. Tiruvella, her mother's home and Kozhencheri, her appa's home together composed her *nadu*, the dark soil of self. *Nadu* in Malayalam is a word for home and homeland. An acclaimed poet she has attempted different genres of novels, memoirs and non-fiction too. In her memoir *Fault Lines* she writes about ethnicity and writing of poetry. *Real Places or How Sense Fragments: Thoughts on Ethnicity and Writing of Poetry* an entire chapter is devoted to scrutinize her relationship with poetry. She asks herself: who am I? Where am I? When am I? These are the questions all diasporic poets ponder over with unique identities and sense of place.

Moniza Alvi offers the similar challenge of dislocation from a different geographical landscape i.e. Pakistan. Also Alvi is internationally recognized as the most powerful diasporic voice in contemporary British writing and is generally neglected by Indian scholarship. The poetry is read using a postcolonial approach with identity as its focus. This paper is limited to only a few aspects of post colonialism as duality, hybridity and the creation of the third space. Alvi's poetry evokes this kind of reading, but is not limited to it. I analyze the various ways in which Alvi establishes challenges and claims the notion of a South Asian / black British identity. Through analyzing Alvi's work from the perspectives of language, place and the interaction with other people, my paper shows that her work addresses the creation of a black British identity, not decrying immigrancy but celebrating the homelessness simultaneously creating multiple homes or carrying the homes with them.

Perpetual movement and searching, as well as displacement may have a negative connotation. However, Alvi offers a more optimistic attitude, as movement, the concept of home and especially the possibility of a new, third or hybrid space is most often portrayed as a positive aspect of finding oneself in a diasporic space. Thus, Alvi's poetry addresses the diaspora space not as confining, but as a place of opening, where people are able to have agency over their own sense of space. Alvi's poetry serves as a positive example for diasporic writing as a mode of (re)claiming her own identity.

Pakistani born Moniza Alvi uprooted to Britain, when an infant, to grow up in Hertfordshire and studied at the universities of York and London. Her mixed parentage of an English mother and a Pakistani father exposed her to

the dual cultures, the challenge of pluralism. Her first, full-length collection, *The Country at My Shoulder*, describes her migrant experiences in 'growing up... and feeling half-Pakistani... on the edge of things' earning her a place on the New Generation Poets list in 1994. Since then she has published seven collections getting nominated for a number of prizes, including three T S Eliot prize shortlistings, and a Cholmondeley award from the Society of Authors in 2002. In 2011 she published *Homesick for the Earth*, her versions of the French poet Jules Supervielle, and, in 2013, *At the Time of Partition*, a long poem in twenty parts based on her grandmother's journey from India to the newly created Pakistan in 1947. Alvi worked as a secondary school teacher for many years and now works as a freelance writer and poetry tutor, mostly for the Poetry School.

Alvi's poetry showcases how nostalgia creates an interesting landscape for south Asian immigrant poets to locate the profound magnitude of their identity. Her experience personify with a variety of poetic expressions. She is creating a dual space, with her poems, of life as a displaced woman but utilizing the rootlessness to carve an identity out of it. Themes of displacement with family, relations are in her poems with emphasis on locations, space.

The experience of diaspora reinvents one's identity and Moniza Alvi's life has influenced her writings. As a daughter of a Pakistani father and an English mother she has to negotiate a dual identity of living in disparate worlds. As she is neither completely Pakistani nor English, Alvi creates a third world or 'space' in Bhabha's terminology. This liminal position creates for Moniza Alvi a unique position which is due to a combination of – culture specific, geographic, gendered and racial reasons. Through the tropes of food, language, clothing and house Alvi defines the essentially feminine search of her identity and home with her poems. Though she is a prolific writer, my paper focuses only on the poems with these motifs.

Alvi's books include *Homesick for the Earth*, her versions of the French poet Jules Supervielle, and *Split World: Poems 1990–2005* (2008), which includes poems from her five previous collections, *The Country at My Shoulder*, *Presents From Pakistan*, *A Bowl of Warm Air*, *Crying My Wife* and *Souls with How the Stone Found Its Voice* (2005). *The Country at My Shoulder* was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot and Whitbread poetry prizes, and *Carrying My Wife* was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation for which Moniza Alvi received a Cholmondeley Award in 2002. *Europa* was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2008.

Alvi's poetry is imbued with a spirit of duality, partition, fractured identity and transformation. Her early

work was concerned with homelands – real and imagined – in poems which are “vivid, witty and imbued with unexpected and delicious glimpses of the surreal – this poet's third country” (Web). In these poems she imagines what it would have been like never to have left, to have grown up in Pakistan rather and become a different person. She tries to occupy the liminal space between “the receding east, the receding west” (Ibid).

In a BBC interview she says that:

“Growing up I felt that my origins were invisible, because there weren't many people to identify with in Hatfield at that time, of a mixed race background or indeed from any other race ... When I eventually went to Pakistan I certainly didn't feel that was home, I'd never felt so English. But I never feel entirely at home in England, and of course, I'm not part of the Asian community” (Web).

Alvi defines identity as something deeper, something that has to do with one's spirit.

“I suppose I would define identity. Very broadly in terms of what you do, what you respect and may be something deeper, your spirit. But it's important to know where you come from, which is perhaps what I was lacking as a child. I think it's important to know what has gone into your making, even quite far back, I think it gives you a sense perhaps of richness” (Web). This constant duality of negotiation of spaces ignites her poetry. Her writing serves as a means of release and catharsis for her uncertain identity.

“I was raised in a glove compartment” is the first poem in the autobiographical section of *The Country at My Shoulder*. The glove compartment is a metaphor for the womb and Alvi miniaturizes herself in order to fit in it. Sometimes her mother's gloved hand would reach for her, but she never sees her mother's face. She exists there “in the quiet” and listens “for the sound of the engine.” Her companions are gloves that hold “out limp fingers”, “notepads and maps” and a “First Aid tin” (*Split World*, 14).

“I Would Like to be a Dot in a Painting by Miro” draws its inspiration from the work of surrealist Juan Miro. The poet expresses the desire to be transformed into a miniature in this poem too: “I would like to be a dot in a painting by Miro”. The desire for smallness is odd and baffling only till the true *raison d'être* is recognized that while she would be “barely distinguishable from other dots” she would be “quite uniquely placed” (Ibid, 20). The metaphor of a dot, the desire to be transferred in form to something tiny, has unique reasons. The dot is an entity on its own, but also a part of the painting. She will never make out what's going on but is not perturbed by it. Not knowing what is going on is an expression of confusion and Alvi's confusion is precisely her perspective, a liminal outlook because of her hybrid/diasporic background.

“Throwing Out My Father's Dictionary” shows words growing shoots in the bins and changes taking place in spellings, punctuations. The poet's father's dictionary contained his signature on the centre page. The poet has a bigger, weightier dictionary containing the latest entries but she dare not inscribe her name on it. The poet here wants to suggest that language is always in flux and one cannot own or possess it by inscribing one's name. It eludes and escapes one's grasp. Language is a major concern for Alvi as she is not at home with her first language, Urdu. She has taken English as another *lingua franca* to search for her identity. In “Hindi Urdu Bol Chaal” from *A Bowl Of Warm Air hands* become a metaphor for reaching out over the distance of difference. Hands are naturally used to reach out to that which is separate or distant from us. “These languages could have been mine,” she says referring to Hindi and Urdu, two confusingly similar languages, so similar that separating them is like “sifting grains of wild rice” (Ibid, 67). She matches the “whorls [of her fingertips] to echoes of sound” and she is anxious to “touch [them] / as if my tongue is a fingertip.” Language is identity not unlike the unique identity of each hand. Alvi is not fluent with either Hindi or Urdu. When she tries to touch them with her fingertip, she is engaging with them like someone who does not feel the languages are an innate part of themselves. The two languages become near objects that she circulates to close in the distances of culture. Her location/ space in England moulds her relation with her country of origin, Pakistan.

The section *Present from Pakistan* from *The Country at My Shoulder* contains poems on themes related to Pakistan. The first poem in this section *The Indian Cooking* describes the Indian style of cooking of keema and khir with a variety of spices, colourful and aromatic. Melted ghee looks like lakes or golden rivers. The poet while tasting these recipes tastes the landscape of India.

“Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan” sheds light on a young girl who is trying to unravel the mixture that makes up the fabric of her identity. Through her discussion and exploration of the two cultures the young girl attempts to develop a sense of where her place is within them. When she wrote the poem, she had not visited Pakistan, her father's original country. The speaker in the poem is about thirteen years old. Her aunts had sent a peacock blue salwar kameez, an orange one, glass bangles and the jewellery from Pakistan. The salwar bottoms were broad and stiff and candy-striped glass bangles drew blood. Though she is fascinated by these colourful clothes and jewellery, she feels awkward wearing them. She longs for denim and corduroy. She contrasts the beautiful clothes and jewellery of India and Pakistan with monotonous English cardigans from Marks and Spenser. Then she recollects her journey with the family to England when she

had prickly heat all over her body. She feels that her identity was indecisive and fragmented.

“I pictured my birth place  
from fifties’ photographs,  
When I was older  
there was conflict, a fractured land  
throbbing through newsprint” (*Ibid*, 33).

The poem depicts a sequence of personal memories causing confusion for the voice undoubtedly belonging to Alvi. The past was hidden for her and the present split. She tries to imagine how it might have been if she’d lived in Lahore instead, and wonder whether she would have been more at home there or in England.

“sometimes I saw Lahore my  
aunts in shaded rooms,  
screened from male visitors,  
sorting presents  
wrapping them in tissue  
Or there were beggars, sweeper girls  
and I was thereof  
no fixed nationality,  
(*Ibid*, 33-34).

*Luckbir* is a pen-portrait of the poet’s aunt who read Jane Austen but never lived beyond the confines of a home. She did not take a job or an evening class. She died young and the poet’s uncle could never forget his beautiful companion with red lips, draped in colourful, gorgeous saris.

The titular poem, *The Country at My Shoulder* tells of the burden of one’s inheritance and culture. It refers to Pakistan without naming, the country of her birth where under the military rule, public execution took place in the square. Women cry at the sight. Shedding tears on their wet dupatta, women toil hard breaking stones. The poet says:

“I try to shake the dust from the country,  
Smooth it with my hands” (*Ibid*, 37).

Alvi says that the country has become her body that she cannot break off. The mixed identity of the poet does not let her rest. She says:

“I water the country with English rain,  
Cover it with English Words  
Soon it will burst, or fall like a meteor” (*Ibid*, 37-38)

The title *The Country at My Shoulder* has particular resonance because it contains poems that negotiate not only a culture that was in the past but a culture that was in a past that she barely remembers. “The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (Bhabha, 7). This seems to be the country at her shoulder; the one that she can’t see directly,

only perhaps from the corner of her eye, the country she is only aware of.

Assimilation for immigrants is complex. Leaving one’s culture and imbibing a new identity is the diasporic confusion eulogized by the diasporic writers. For Alvi it is more so as she was uprooted just after her birth. In England, her mixed heritage makes her stand apart. In her poetry, Alvi defies stereotypes questioning gender and culture. This double consciousness, multiple identities leads Alvi to the inconstant character of home. Home is flexible without any rigid limits. Multiculturalism seeps through her poetry. That was the message of “The Sari” where multiple cultures or homes were instead expressed in one body: “*Your home is your country*” (*Split World*, 39). The poem *Sari* is symbolic depiction of the poet’s culture. Alvi creates a sari with mythical proportions. It is a sari that is prepared before her birth, is unraveled and passed around the community by “All the people” who are awaiting her arrival in this world. The sari becomes immense, stretching “from Lahore to Hyderabad” and wavering over “across the Arabian Sea” (*Ibid*, 39), its length ultimately bridging distances between continents.

As the sari unfurls across the different continents, it takes on their colours and cultures. The sari becomes a metaphor of tradition and history traversing the distance between two cultures. The sari is created not just by her Pakistani community, but also by her English one, forming dual identity. Alvi understands the complexity of embodying two cultures, one Pakistani/Indian and the other English; had she less vision she could have chosen the easier path of veering off into one tradition or culture.

She uses a mythical sari to transcend the limitations of one identity. This is the twist at the end of the poem: The infant is taught that while she is wrapped in a sari that has the colours of different countries and traditions, ultimately she will live within herself and belong to herself first.

Alvi has written several poems where she refers to India, the undivided Bharat before partition. She says in *Map of India*:

“India is manageable-smaller than  
My hand- the Mahanadi river  
Thinner than my life line” (*Ibid*, 40).

*The Draught* describes the Indian weather in the mountains in winter. *The Bed*, the last poem of the collection *The Country at My Shoulder* symbolizes home, the country and one’s shelter that can hold the tempests of one’s dreams.

Alvi’s collection of poems in, *The Country at My Shoulder*, deal with issues of identity, home and exile. Alvi also exhibits a distinct Indian influence on her poetic sensibility. Few poems of later collections of Alvi’s with diasporic sensibility are discussed.



In "An Unknown Girl" from *A Bowl of Warm Air* Alvi writes about an unknown girl in a neon-lit bazaar, who is applying henna patterns to her palm. The henna lines form a pattern on her palms, "new brown veins" and leave "a snail trail" when washed off. They become a metaphor for a new fate, or a new identity but unfortunately, they "will fade in a week." They are the lines of a map.

When India appears and reappears  
I'll lean across a country  
with my hands outstretched  
longing for the unknown girl  
in the neon bazaar (*Ibid*,75).

Alvi makes it deliberately ambiguous; she could be the unknown girl she longs for, one who almost had a country. We understand Alvi's dilemma when "She rubs her face / against a map of the world" in "The Colours of the World." The stubborn insistence on one home is the focus of "My Aunts don't want to move", one of the more desolate poems in *A Bowl of Warm Air*. As the title suggests, it is about the poet's aunts and their reluctance to leave their house. The aunts themselves are mostly absent from the poem, not described directly in person or speech and only referred to with the pronoun "they", that stands in place of the real women. The title also has a less literal meaning that the aunts do not want to move beyond their small existence into the big bad world. We are never told explicitly why they do not want to leave. When we do catch sight of the aunts, it is only a fleeting one through a swift description of motion as they "hurry across the yellow courtyard". The patriarchy implicit in Pakistani society is hinted at through the dead male members. The house is a metaphor for a safe haven and also the claustrophobic world the aunts have got habituated to.

The search for home and belonging through metaphors of house, home, and country is a constant preoccupation. "I wanted to marry a country," she says in "The Wedding." "You grow a second city in your head" she says in "Exile." In "Rainy Season" she takes herself high above the neighborhood of "the house where [she] was born" and then commences to conjure up a flood where presumably all else is destroyed except her house, which she sets "like an ark on the ocean." In "The Airborne House", "ceiling fans whirl like helicopters" and the house takes off. "Rolling" in which the poet travels thousands of miles through her entire history, her "father's house / before he fled to Pakistan", her family name, into "the girl / I might have been."

In *Go Back to England*, Moniza Alvi describes how she felt a sense of being a stranger in Lahore where she was born.

As a diasporic poet, Moniza Alvi reiterates the idea that immigrancy is the essence of life. The very concept of 'NO HOME' or homelessness paves way for home everywhere, anywhere. "To be unhomed is not to be homeless," as Bhabha said in *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha,9).

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